
20
years
of
AIDS

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Twenty years ago, on June 5, 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) flagship publication, the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (*MMWR*), reported five cases of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia affecting young gay men in Los Angeles; two of the men had died. At the time, it seemed an anomaly, of possible interest only to a handful of public health and medical professionals. We know today that this brief article heralded the onset of a global epidemic of a disease now called AIDS that has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths around the world and affected millions more.

Since that time, the *MMWR* has published over 400 reports about AIDS — a chronicle of the understanding, transmission, prevention, and therapy of the disease. This chronicle shows a disease that rapidly gained momentum, both in numbers and in range. The early reports (1981, 1982, 1983) are milestones in an era of discovery and awareness when prevention recommendations were made based solely on epidemiologic studies before the cause of the new, unexplained illness was known. During this time, the *MMWR* became a primary source of information about the spread of AIDS, prevention, and care.

Shortly following the identification of the retrovirus that causes AIDS (1984), now known as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), a blood test to detect the antibodies to HIV (1985) was developed. This advance helped researchers discover that persons who had developed AIDS were only the "tip of the iceberg" of a much larger epidemic of HIV infection. The advent of HIV antibody testing ushered in an era of new prevention interventions to further protect the Nation's blood supply (1985) and prevent transmission to newborns (1985), and to help people learn their infection status and how to protect others (1987). These expanded prevention efforts introduced the concept of universal precautions for health care workers (1987) and general education to promote healthy behaviors among target populations such as youth (1988). Use of the antibody test also improved tracking of the disease and clinical diagnosis for treatment of tuberculosis and other AIDS-related diseases (1987; 1992).

Following the approval of azidothymidine (AZT, zidovudine) in 1987, clinical trials in the 1990s showed this treatment to be effective in prevention of perinatal transmission of HIV. The *MMWR* published guidelines for the widespread use of AZT among pregnant women with HIV (1994). As a result, AIDS among newborns has become a rarity in the United States, making elimination of this mode of transmission a reachable goal (2001). In 1996, a milestone in the fight against AIDS was reached with the development of new, highly effective antiretroviral therapies. Although not a cure, these treatments, used in combination therapy, delayed illness and death among persons infected with HIV (1997). AIDS cases and deaths soon began to decline (1997) and new guidelines for care (1995) and treatment for persons with HIV (1998) were published.

The June 1, 2001, issue of *the MMWR* — Twenty Years of AIDS — provides updated information about the ongoing epidemiologic aspects and impact of HIV/AIDS on communities in the United States and other countries. The issue contains the recurring message that calls for vigorous and renewed efforts to respond to the continuing devastation of AIDS (2001).

The *MMWR* collection contained within is more than a historical account. It is an important and impressive chronicle of the first 20 years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the tireless efforts of hundreds of people in various fields — science, medicine, prevention, labor, legal, social, behavioral, and many other professionals and volunteers — who have worked to end the spread of this disease in the world. As the pandemic of HIV evolves and new prevention strategies and treatments are developed, the *MMWR* will continue to be at the forefront to produce timely and critical reports about HIV infection and AIDS.